



# THOMAS HART BENTON'S AMERICA TODAY

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and
Stephanie L. Herdrich

with a contribution from Shawn Digney-Peer and Cynthia Moyer



The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

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# DIRECTOR'S NOTE

Many enthusiasts of American modernism may have forgotten that Thomas Hart Benton-often recognized as the leader of the 1930s movement known as Regionalism, which celebrated rural life in the United States-lived and worked primarily in New York from 1912 to 1935, one of the most vibrant and dynamic periods in the city's history. It was also a critical time for Benton's artistic development, as he gradually established and set on the course that would define his career, one characterized by a passionate commitment to public art, populist subject matter, and a distinctively expressive figurative style rooted predominantly in European Mannerism.

The pinnacle of Benton's New York years was the mural cycle he painted for the newly erected headquarters of the New School for Social Research at 66 West Twelfth Street, which opened to the public in January 1931. Called America Today, the mural—his first significant commission for an institution—raised Benton's artistic stature not only in New York but also nationwide, setting the stage for his appearance in December 1934 on the cover of Time magazine, the first time an artist was accorded that honor.

This Bulletin reveals the many remarkable stories that America Today has to tell and presents new discoveries about Benton's epic cycle. The essay and entries contained in these pages elucidate the mural's rich content, particularly Benton's celebration of the Machine Age and American "progress" in the 1920s. But it also examines how Benton captured the dramatic shift in mood as the country's economic conditions worsened over the course of

his nine-month project. The authors discuss the circumstances in which Benton conceived of and created America Today; new information on the artist's working methods and techniques; and the many twists and turns of the mural's fate preceding its arrival at the Metropolitan as an extraordinary gift from AXA in December 2012. This transformative gift was facilitated by H. Barbara Weinberg, Curator Emerita, The American Wing, and Pan Stave, Senior Administrator in the Department of Modern and Contemporary Art. In the summer of 2015, America Today will move to the Museum's Lila Acheson Wallace Wing for Modern and Contemporary Art, where the mural will enjoy a setting befitting its wide-ranging art-historical and cultural resonances.

The organization of the exhibition "Thomas Hart Benton's America Today Mural Rediscovered" and the research and writing of this illuminating Bulletin were undertaken by Randall R. Griffey, Associate Curator, Modern and Contemporary Art, Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser, Alice Pratt Brown Curator of American Painting and Sculpture; and Stephanie L. Herdrich, Research Associate, The American Wing. The William Cullen Bryant Fellows are to be thanked for their continued support of American art at the Metropolitan Museum and for their part in making this Bulletin possible. We would like to express our gratitude to AXA, especially CEO Mark Pearson, for the wonderful gift of Benton's mural and for its generous support in bringing this exhibition to life. The company's commitment to the Museum and collaboration on this singular project. are deeply appreciated.

#### Thomas P. Campbell

Director, The Metropolitan Museum of Art



## SPONSOR'S STATEMENT

It is with great pride and pleasure that AXA joins with The Metropolitan Museum of Art in inviting the world to rediscover Thomas Hart Benton's America Today, a masterpiece in mural form that captures the contemporary scene and spirit of the nation throughout the 1920s.

Within the mural's ten panel paintings, Benton created a sweeping panorama of one of the most fascinating periods in world history, capturing the neon excitement of 1920s life in New York City, the promise and the threat of industrial society, women's emerging liberation, the rhythmic pulse of the Jazz Age, and the advent of the Great Depression. The Met's remarkable staging of the exhibition "Thomas Hart Benton's America Today Mural Rediscovered" as a period room enhances the experience for millions of visitors as they contemplate this dynamic era-

The history of Benton's twentiethcentury masterwork brings to light the 
important partnerships—private and 
public, civic and cultural—that were 
formed to create, preserve, and share 
his artistic legacy. The story of America 
Today began in 1930 with its original 
commission by Alvin Johnson, head of 
the New School for Social Research 
in Manhattan. In 1983, after fifty years 
of gracing the boardroom of the New 
School, the ten mural panels faced 
a sale at auction and the risk of being

permanently dismantled. In February 1984, convinced by the efforts of Mayor Edward Koch and other civic and cultural leaders, AXA Equitable's then President and CEO John Carter acquired the mural to ensure that America Today would be kept intact and in New York City.

AXA Equitable then collaborated with the Williamstown Regional Art Conservation Laboratory (now the Williamstown Art Conservation Center) and the Williams College Museum of Art on a painstaking restoration of Benton's ten panel paintings, which had discolored and deteriorated over time. Working closely with the laboratory, the Williams College Museum of Art mounted a special exhibition to display the mural in its various phases of restoration. Following the completion of the restoration, in 1986, America Today was placed on display in AXA Equitable's headquarters lobby, where for decades our employees and thousands of visitors were captivated by the gusto of Benton's imagery

AXA donated America Today to
The Metropolitan Museum of Art in
December 2012, upholding our promise
to honor the legacy of this celebrated
work. Today, we encourage scholars
and art enthusiasts of all ages to view
the mural in its new home at one of
the world's foremost cultural institutions,
where it will be protected, studied,
and enjoyed by millions of people
in perpetuity.

#### Mark Pearson

Chairman and Chief Executive Officer AXA US

Opposite: detail of Steel

# "The Full Force of His Spiritual Bellows"

# THOMAS HART BENTON'S AMERICA TODAY MURAL REDISCOVERED

Randall R. Griffey and Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser

New York has finally come into possession of a wholly modern art center, a consummation devoutly to be wished for. While there have been plentiful signs of an advancing interest in the new trend in art scattered here and there about the town, it has remained for the New School [for] Social Research to go ahead and create a cultural center that is not only wholly modern in its material aspects but in spirit as well.

-Ralph Flint, Art News, 1931

#### The New School for Social Research

The opening of the headquarters of the New School for Social Research at 66 West Twelfth Street on January 1, 1931. was cause for much public interest and excitement (fig. 1). Since its founding in 1919 by a group of progressive intellectuals and professors, including economic historian Charles Beard and sociologist Thorstein Veblen, the school (now known simply as the New School) had become an important center of experimentation and reform in adult learning. The inauguration of its gleaming, modern facility signaled that the New School was flourishing under Alvin Johnson, an economist who cofounded the institution and became its first director in 1922. Indeed, the opening of the building on New Year's Day heralded not only the start of a new

calendar year, but also the dawn of what promised to be a resurgent era in the intellectual life of New York.

This promise took shape architecturally in the strikingly streamlined building itself, designed by Viennese architect and designer Joseph Urban (fig. 2) After training and working in Europe in architecture, illustration, and design, Urban had relocated first to Boston in 1912 and then to New York in 1914, establishing himself professionally with an impressive range of projects, including dozens of sets for the Metropolitan Opera and his design for the Ziegfeld Theatre at Fifty-Fourth Street and Avenue of the Americas (1926-27) The New School project - for which administrators, led by Johnson, had also considered the equally high-profile but less amiable Frank Lloyd

Wright-provided Urban with a desirable opportunity to turn his talents for the first time to a school. Urban forwent his usual propensity for architectural theatricality. often manifest in the form of eclecticism and historicism, and embraced instead more austere, streamlined, and expressly functional forms drawn from Bauhaus and Art Deco design. The resulting building drew praise from many critics. including a glowing review by Ralph Flint in Art News: "Set down boldly in the middle of a row of [West] Twelfth Street houses, redolent of lavender and old lace, the new structure that Joseph Urban has designed for this ambitious group of mid-town modernists rises strikingly with its severely blocked facade of alternating bands of patterned brick and infenestrated glass. The moment you see the new structure you feel it stands for something new and vital, something wide awake and freshly minted "a The oval auditorium on the first floor earned particular acclaim and remains one of the city's most architecturally significant spaces from the period.

Beyond the building itself, the main attraction of the New School upon its opening was the art inside, which visualized the institution's commitment to engage with the prevailing ideas and



1. Walker Evans (1903–1975), The New School for Social Research, 1930–31. Gelatin silver print; 6 ½ × 4 ½ in. (17.5 × 12.4 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Gift of Myriam and Harry Lunn, 1995 (1995.560.3)



2. Joseph Urban, 1920





3. José Clemente Orazco (left) working on his mural for the New School, 1930

concerns of modernity. Even in the wake of the recent opening of the Museum of Modern Art on November 7, 1929, the New School asserted itself as one of the city's most critical resources and as a vocal exponent of modern art. The new facility featured, for example, a gallery dedicated to exhibitions drawn from the collection of the Société Anonyme, an avant-garde arts organization led by artist and patron Katherine Dreier, and a

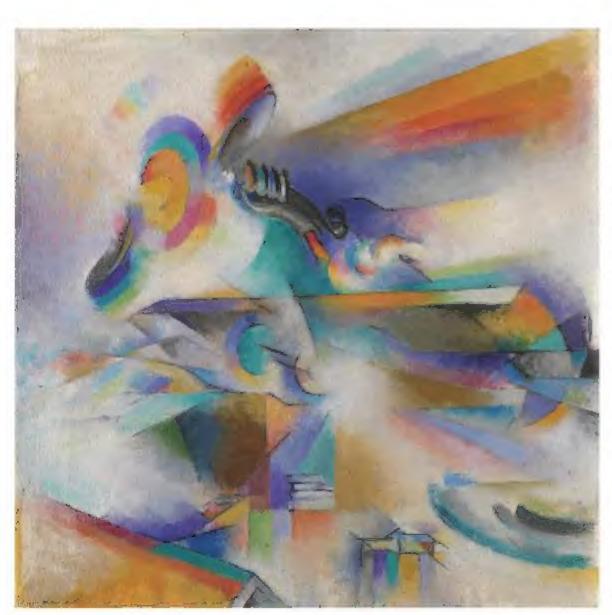
mural on the fifth floor by famed Mexican artist José Clemente Orozco, completed about three weeks after the building's official opening (fig. 3). In addition to themes of universal brotherhood and revolutionary movements in less industrialized nations, Orozco's mural addressed the masses enslaved under British imperialism in India, the Socialist revolution in Mexico, and the Marxist revolution in Russia, Still, the most

widely discussed and debated work of art in the New School was America Today, the mural painted for the school's third-floor boardroom by Missouri native Thomas Hart Benton (fig. 4)

#### Thomas Hart Benton in New York

By the time Benton received the commission from Johnson, in April 1930, he had been living and working in New York for about eighteen years, after having 4. Nickolas Muray
[1892–1965], Thomas
Hart Benton with Rita
and Yaung Tam, 1929.
Gelatin on triacetate
film; 10 × 6 in. (25.4 ×
20.3 cm). George
Eastman House,
International Museum
of Photography and
Film, Rochester; Gift of
the Muray Family
[77:0189:0254]

# IMAGE NOT AVAILABLE



5. Stanton Macdonald-Wright (1890~1973), Aeroplane Synchromy in Yellow-Orange, 1920. Oil on canvas;  $24 \% \times 24$  in. [61.6  $\times$  61 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Alfred Stieglitz Collection, 1949 (49.70.52)

studied in Chicago (1907-8) and Paris (1908-11). During the 1910s the painter cobbled together a livelihood working various odd jobs, including painting sets for a film studio in Fort Lee, New Jersey, an experience he would later draw upon for America Today. Throughout this formative period Benton painted in a range of styles, from figurative to abstract, and frequently in the manner of Synchromism—a style developed by his friend Stanton Macdonald-Wright, whom he had met in Pans, and the painter Morgan Russell - which aspired to fuse the sensations of sight, sound, and energy through a quasi-abstract synthesis of Futurism and Cubism (fig. 5). Benton also became closely affiliated with several of the city's leftist artistic and political organizations, including John Weichsel's People's Art Guild, founded in 1915, prompting him to read Socialist and Communist texts. At the same time, exhibitions of his work at the Anderson Gallenes and Daniel Gallery in New York provided Benton with critical exposure.

A stint in the U.S. Navy during World War I, when Benton was stationed in Norfolk, Virginia, piqued the artist's interest in American history as a meaningful alternative to his ongoing experimentations in abstraction. Additionally, near the end of his Navy tenure Benton encountered Jesse Ames Spencer's History of the United States, published between 1858 and 1866 in four volumes. Inspired by Spencer's expansive and richly illustrated narrative, Benton, upon his return to New York in 1919, began painting his own monumental cycle, which he called American Historical Epic. Benton commenced this ambitious series of paintings without a patron and eventually abandoned it after completing about twenty panels on themes beginning with the European conquest of the New World and ending with the construction of New York.

As the 1920s progressed Benton grew increasingly restless both personally and artistically, feelings prompted in part by the death of his father, in 1924. As Benton scholar Henry Adams has noted, from 1925 to 1928 the artist "disappeared every summer. When he set off on these jaunts, he told no one where he was



6. Thomas Hart Benton (1889–1975), Cotton Pickers, Georgia, 1928–29.
Tempera and all an canvas; 30 × 35 ½ in. (76.2 × 91.1 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; George A. Hearn Fund, 1933 (33.144.2)

going and set no itinerary "4 In fact the painter decamped from New York each year, sketchbook in hand, to points west and south, seeking out scenes of everyday life that for him resonated with larger historical meaning in his autobiography Benton recailed that this time of wandering saw "the beginning of those studies of the American rural scene which would hold so much of my interest for the next fifteen years. It was the beginning of what came to be called my Regionalism "5 These studies served as critical touchstones for easel paintings he completed back in New York, including Cotton Pickers, Georgia (fig. 6), in the Metropolitan's collection But as scholar Emily Braun has pointed out Benton's "search for the distinctively American was by no means limited to the culture of the soil nor was it dominated by a regressive longing for the past "6 Rather, Benton's drawings from the 1920s demonstrate an equal fascination with modern machines and technology (see figs 26-28), and he drew heavily and enthusiastically from this arge body of pencil and wash sketches

in conceiving his plans for the New School mural

The leading forum for mural decoration and the "allied arts" in the 1920s was the Architectural League of New York As Benton struggled to establish himself as a mural painter, he began exhibiting his mural senes and drawings in New York in the hope of gaining a commission in doing so, he was aided by several members of the League, including the respected commercial artist Fred Dana Marsh, who perhaps had Benton or Orozco in mind when he wrote a "Report of the Committee on Decorative Painting" in 1924 Marsh urged the League to "either stimulate the Old Guard" or look to "a number of clever young painters working outside of the membership," adding that he would not "presume to criticize the efforts of a Puvis de Chavannes but I would ask that these very able men consider for a moment the American Scene. 7 Benton began showing his murals in the League's annual exhibi trons and started to gain an audience Panels from his first senes, American

Historical Epic, for example were included in a one artist show ("First Comprehensive Exhibition of the Paintings by Thomas H Benton") at the New Gallery, New York from February 12 to 28, 1927 Benton was disappointed, however, when the New York Public Library rejected his mura. History of New York In a 1931 New York Times article Benton discussed the canceled project with critic Edward Alden Jewell, who mentions John Singer Sargent's prominent but rather academic mural cycles for the Boston Public Library and the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, completed in 1919 and 1925 "I couldn't get the library people interested," Benton lamented "Why?" asked Jewell, "Are they waiting for another John Singer | Sargent to come along with his bagful of Paris Opéra and Empire Theatre prophets in red and gold relief?"

Prior to their joint New School commission, Benton's and Urban's paths had likely crossed in the context of these Architectural League exhibitions Atthe League's 42nd Annual Exhibition, for example, held at New York's Grand Central Palace from February to March of 1927. Benton exhibited four of the panels from American Historical Epic while Urban displayed his designs for the Ziegfeld Three years later, after receiving the commission for the New School's building, Urban showed plans for this major project at the 45th Annual Exhibition, prompting art dealer Alma Reed to approach Alvin Johnson about having Orozco, her companion, do a mural for the building Benton's commission soon followed, or as he later put it, "I found my first public wal. "9

#### America Today

Beginning roughly where American Historical Epic left off, in the modern world, America Today takes viewers on a sweeping adventure across great expanses of the geography and culture of the United States. Although Benton d.d not dictate a particular sequence that the viewer must follow to expenience the mural, the individual panels seem to unfold like the chapters of a book telling the story of the use of a great civilization. In particular, Benton traces the emergence of the Machine Age and



7. Lewis Hine (1874–1940), learns, Empire State Building, 1930. Gelatin silver print;  $7 \% \times 9 \%$  in. (18.7  $\times$  23.7 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Ford Motor Company Collection, Gift of Ford Motor Company and John C. Waddell, 1987 (1987.1100.119)

its effects on American life. On the wall facing the viewer as you enter the mural room is Instruments of Power, which forcefully announces the advent of that age through its streamlined industrial utopia. To the right, on what was originally the room is west wall, appear Deep South, Midwest and Changing West. On the opposite (originally east) wall are Coal Steel, and City Building. And on the north wall, adjacent to and above the entrance, are City Activities with Subway, Outreaching Hands, and City Activities with Dance Hall.

Benton deliberately departed from the traditional allegories and personifications that filled the murals he remembered from h.s family s years in Washington DC (the artist's father, M. C. Benton served four terms as a member of the House of Representatives), as well as the more recent projects by Sargent and other established artists. Drawing heavily from the voluminous travel sketches he had executed throughout the 1920s, Benton loaded his compositions with teeming masses popular activities, and, especially the labor of contemporary life Workers to:1 throughout America Today in cotton (Georgia and Louisiana) and wheat fields (Kansas, Missoun, and Oklahoma) down coal mines (Alabama,

Pennsylvania, and West Virginia), in steel plants (Maryland), and on construction sites (New York). Even the women dancing in City Activities with Dance Hall are workers, or "taxi dancers," who joined their male partners for ten cents a ticket.

The diversity of the labor in America Today—from agranan to industrial to recreational — is a barometer of how Benton viewed a region's relationship to modernity The South, for instance, remains moored to the past, while New York exemplifies the dynamic present, even the future. Along the way, horizontal expanses of cotton, rice, and wheat fields gradually yield to the vertical trajectories of oil rigs, smokestacks, and skyscrapers in spaces increasingly compressed to the point of bursting The City Activities panels adjacent to the entrance, opposite Instruments of Power, best fit this description Devoted mostly to the leisure activities of urban dwellers —dancing, movies. soda shops they bustle with the visual, physical, and aural expenences of modernity

#### Progress

In settling on a narrative thrust for his mural, Benton seized on the concept of "progress," which permeated American culture in the years following World War I The particular manifestation of modern progress that captured Benton's imagination most was the nation s flourishing industry. Tying back to the artist's childhood fascination with trains the conspicuous proliferation of superhu man machines and industrial plants across the nation struck Benton as one of the key characteristics of his time and as a uniquely American phenomenon. especially in the grandness of its scale and impact. Benton's reception and interpretation of industry in these terms owed much to his prior residency in Chicago and to his new life in New York Construction (see fig. 29), a small painting from 1923 possibly related to Benton's American Historical Epic project, testifies to his fascination with the great change and growth of the New York skyline in the 1920s, a subject that bound him artistically to many fellow painters and photographers of the period, including Lewis Hine Hine's iconic photograph Icarus (fig. 7), which shows a fearless construction worker balanced on a loop of coiled wire high atop the unfinished Empire State Building, takes an airborne view of the urban and industrial progress that Benton painted at ground level in the City Building panel of America Today (see detail opposite)

Although progress is the dominant theme of America Today, Benton made sure to include undeniable reminders of its costs. The advancement of the United States, the artist impresses on the viewer, is predicated on the collective labor of (mostly male) bodies Environmental concerns follow in kind Clearing the forests in Midwest leaves behind a desolate landscape, while the burning of newly discovered oil in Changing West blackens the sky with smoke Trains factories, and smokestacks beich polluting exhaust into the air. Benton's interpretation of progress was further tempered by new and difficult economic realities that were undemable by the time the New School boardroom opened in January 1931 These appear most directly in the two City Activities panels, on either side of



the door, and in the narrow panel above, Outreaching Hands. On the left, in City Activities with Subway, we glimpse behind a Salvation Army band storefronts emblazoned with signs advertising bargain sales and closing businesses. Benton painted this passage in hot red and orange hiles, denoting a fevensh, even dystopian environment. Similarly, hovering over the pane, on the right, City Activities with Dance Hall, is a worned stockbroker watching market returns on a ticker tape machine. Such strains of uncertainty and doubt course through Benton's frenetic compositions.

#### Composition, Style, and Technique

Given the diversity of the regions and subjects in America Today. Benton employed a range of compositional devices to tie the panels together stylistically and conceptually. A long horizontal strip of blue extends across the top of all ten, underscoring the fact that the figures in these scenes despite the distances separating them, coexist under the same sky and by extension, are bound by a shared

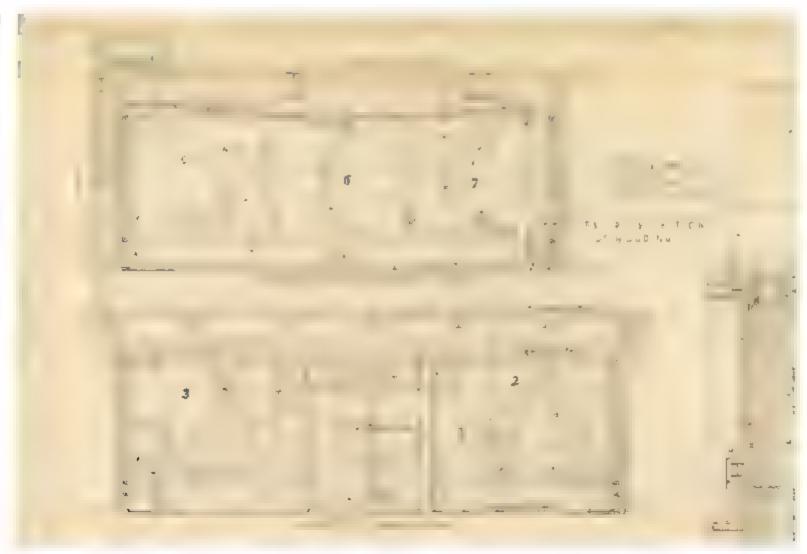
national identity and common humanity
The black cotton worker in Deep South
finds a muscular counterpart in the
construction worker in City Building,
a relationship that evokes the waves of
migration out of the Jim Crow South to
Northern cities from the late nineteenth
into the early twentieth century Similarly
the welder in Changing West wears a
bright red shirt and blue jeans paralleling
the attire of the miner in Coal Grain
elevators and oil rigs on one side of the
room echo factory stacks and skyscrapers on the other

Most dramatically, Benton's mural is unified by the dazzling silver aluminum-leaf moldings that surround and jut into each panel, to which the artist responded with dramatic shifts in perspective and fantastic spatial leaps. An architectural rendering from Urban's studio (fig. 8), which features a plan of the entire room, elevations of all four walls, and a cross section of the molding, provides considerable insight into this striking and unique dimension of Urban and Benton's project. Dating to June 1930, less than two months after Benton

received the commission, the drawing accounts for the moldings almost exactly as they appear in the final mural, confirming that the design for this decorative aspect of the room preceded Benton's panel compositions.

The frames and moldings impart an Art Deco flourish throughout America Today, but Benton also responded to them in ways that enhance the impact and meaning of his subjects. Indeed the apparent ease with which Benton accommodated the molding scheme reflects his work on compositional theories throughout the 1920s, a system of interlocking and interconnected forms he described as "The Mechanics of Form Organization. "11 The bend of the coal miner's back, for example echoes the great arc of molding that swoops over his head the small American Indian near the bottom of Changing West appears further marginalized and suppressed by the honzontal band above him The black subway rider is literally and symbolically separated from his fellow passenger next to him by the vertical band that abruptly cuts between them

8. J. J. Maure (draftsman) and Joseph Urban (architect), Board Room at Third Floor (detail), June 1930. The New School Archives and Special Collections





9. Abraham Bloemaert (1566–1651), Moses Striking the Rock, 1596. Oil on canvas; 31 % × 42 ½ in. [79.7 × 108 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Purchase, Gift of Mary V. T. Eberstadt, by exchange, 1972 (1972-171)

The expansive geographic and cultural reach of America Today is matched by the mural's wide-ranging stylistic concerns and sources. The artist's dynamic figurative style was. as many authors have explored, rooted in his admiration of European old masters particularly painters associated with sixteenth-century Mannerism which cast off High Renaissance rules regarding scientific perspective and naturalistic form (fig 9) In their seeming independence from and disregard for trad.t.on artists such as Tintoretto whom Benton greatly respected, appeared to many audiences and critics in the early twentieth century as relatively modern" in sensibility 12 Benton s devotion to figurative art also owed much to his close affiliation with the Art Students League of New York an influentia, center for traditional art training where he began teaching in 1926 Many of the League's instructors including Kenneth Hayes Miller. remained committed to representational painting in the face of increasing waves of European abstract art in New York throughout the interwar period

Even so America Today, especially Instruments of Power hints at Benton's knowledge of more avant garde modern art movements, including Italian Futurism which similarly exalted the dynamic energy of the Machine Age. In particular Benton's coloristic rendering of a cross section of the combustion engine, at the center of the composition, reveals his proximity to Synchromism. Moreover his stage-like renderings of buildings—the dam in *Instruments* the storefront in Changing West, and the facade with barred windows in Outreaching Hands—evoke the brooding compositions of avant-garde painter Giorgio de Chirico even as they recall Benton's own early experiences constructing and painting sets for movies in the 1910s

Benton's ability to execute America Today with such dextenty and speed the actual painting was done in just three months-is better understood through an examination of his meticulous process and careful planning His fascination with artists of the past had led him to study their working methods and to adopt some of their techniques. By 1925-26, for example Benton had already taught himself to paint with egg tempera by reading Cennino Cennini's II libro dell'arte (The Craftsman's Handbook, ca. 1390) a treatise whose translation into English in the nineteenth century proved critical to the tempera revival in the early twentieth century. He used tempera in

part to honor the old master painters that he so admired finding it appealing for its resemblance to traditional fresco painting, but he also liked the fast drying qualities of the medium <sup>13</sup>

During the six months it took to p.an the murals, from about April to September 1930, Benton consulted the drawings he had made during his travels across the country and then sought out mends and acquaintances to use as models for figures in the city scenes including Alvin Johnson as well as the burlesque star Peggy Reynolds (see figs 32, 38) In the long tradition of artists incorporating life portraits of contemporaries into their monumental works—from Michelangelo to John Trumbull — Benton mined these sketches to imbue America Today with a vivid sense of time and place "To the entical objections to my murals that they are too loud and too disturbing to be in good taste," Benton explained, there is only the answer that they represent the U.S. which is also loud and not in good taste ' Every head is a real person drawn from life. Every detail is a thing I myself have seen and known. \*14

Drawings in hand. Benton then made intricate clay models of the mural to establish a rhythmic flow a practice he had adopted as early as 1919, again prompted by old master artists such as Tintoretto. "I proceeded." he recalled "by making careful drawings from life then modelling my compositions in clay, then tinting the clay figures with black and white to simulate differences of local tone. "15 Although Benton's clay models for America Today do not survive those for his 1959 mura, in the Harry S Truman Library and Museum were recorded in photographs (fig. 10).

Benton painted America Today in the fall and winter of 1930, working in a loft at 8 East Twelfth Street, near the New School, provided for him by Alvin Johnson. Upon receiving the commission, he agreed to accept no fee, telling Johnson, "I'll paint you a picture in tempera if you'll finance the eggs "16". The intrigued director later made daily visits to Benton's studio, observing the artist's time-consuming and disciplined methods. Benton also received the full cooperation of architect Joseph Urban.



10. Benton working on a clay model of his mural for the Harry S. Truman Library and Museum, Independence. Missouri, 1959. Louise Bruner Papers, 1945–76, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.



11. Jackson and Charles Pollock in New York, 1930. Charles Pollock Papers, 1902–90, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

collaborating with him on the placement of the silver aluminum leaf molding ,it would be their only project together Urban died shortly thereafter, in 1933)

The artist Reginald Marsh (Fred Dana Marsh's son) became a close friend of Benton's at this time. He recorded in his journal how in 1929 Benton came to his studio and taught him "how to paint with eggs," calling it a "fortunate event." Marsh, who adopted tempera for his own paintings, returned the favor by serving as a model for several figures in America.

Maish remembered, "apparently always in time to help him carry about the studio his 400 lb murals... it was amusing to watch Benton, muscular in his underwear, sit low in an armichair, survey the mural, suddenly load his brush with a lot of tempera goo, crouch like a cat, spring across the room in a flying tackle, scrub the brush around in great circles, catch his breath, and then resume his place in the chair."

Another frequent presence in Benton's

studio was the young Jackson Pollock who, upon learning that Orozco and Benton were painting murals for the New School, joined his brothers Charles and Frank in New York in 1930 and at Charles's suggestion, became Benton's student. All three Pollock brothers studied with Benton in fact, no doubt inspiring the older artist with their youthful energy and ideas (fig. 11). Jackson also served Benton as a studio assistant, helping to mix tempera paint, clean the studio and, like Marsh, action posing" for several of the figures.

Companing Benton's preliminary studies to the final mural panels beautifully illuminates his careful process of compositional refinement. In the study for City Activities with Subway, for example (fig. 12). Benton articulated the mass of writhing figures and indicated where the interior frames should appear but he only roughly outlined the forms leaving space around each figure. In the final mural Benton sharply cropped and compressed the scene while simultaneously adding intricate narrative details through the awkward physical interactions among the figures crammed into the subway. The same is true for the evangelist in the center of the mural who in a comedic masterstroke nearly collides with the burlesque dancer behind him

There are two known tempera studies for City Building In the first (fig. 13) Benton roughed in the figures and background details using soft pinks and greens and outlined forms with charcoal lines The figure of an architect wears a green shirt, and the worker with a hat and his back to the viewer wears an orange one In the second study (fig. 14) the scene has been tightened up considerably elaborate details have been added, and the palette has been shifted to richer colors an olive green for the architect's shirt light red for the worker's In the fina. mural panel the colors are even more vivid, with the architect wearing rich brown and the worker clad in deep red

Further evidence of Benton's artistic process, including other techniques inspired by the old masters that he is known to have used consistently but selectively over the course of his career



12. Benton, Study for "City Activities with Subway," 1930. Oil on Mosenite:  $15\,\%\times23$  in. (38.7 × 58.4 cm). Collection of AXA, New York



13. Benton, Study for "City Building," 1930. Tempera and charcoal on board, 15 × 20 in. (38.1 × 50.8 cm). Collection of AXA, New York



14. Benton, Study for "City Building," 1930. Tempera and crayon on board; 15 1/4 × 19 1/4 in. (39.1 × 49 1 cm) Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney (31.391)



has recently been discovered in the America Today murals 21 Infrared reflectography conducted by the Department of Paintings Conservation at the Metropol.tan Museum has revealed, for example extensive graphite under drawing beneath certain passages such as one of the dancing couples in City Activities with Dance Hall (see flg 44) Benton also sometimes relied on small grids to transfer details of a drawing to canvas as seen in the portrait of his wife, Rita, in the same panel (fig. 15) The artist elaborated on his grid system in a 1966 interview. "[Y]ou make a gnll [gnd], a smal, gnll on the drawing and a larger grill [on] the canvas and simply rapidly draw what's in them and rule out the lines. 122 He occasionally made larger overall grids too, as discovered beneath the paint layers of the City Activities panels (For an overview of these findings and a brief history of the conservation of America Today, see pages 45-47)

#### Reception, Preservation, and Legacy

Most prominent critics praised America
Today, many of them enthusiastically
giving Benton credit for focusing on
contemporary life on such a large scale.
Edward Alden Jewell inspected Benton's
panels in process and reported from the
artist's studio in November 1930

These murals may well shock the timid or the beholder whose thought pursues an academic groove, for they are aflame with high-keyed color. often gansh in the fidelity of their response to a native drama as yet so largely raw and so youthfully impulsive. The impact of the room that contains them may well be terrific Perhaps only the strong may enter there without permanently parking hope of survival at the door And yet for all their crude harsh vigor of life, the paintings are instinct, too, with fineness and tenderness and an abundant love. In viewing these murals one feels that at last Thomas Benton is really speaking out with the full force of his spiritual bellows 23

Jewell reported again on America Today after it had been completed and installed

in Urban's building (fig. 16), exclaiming that "with the molding divisions in place, [the panels] look even better than one dared hope. This ought to prove one of the most interesting modern rooms in America." \*\*A Lloyd Goodnich, a towering critic of the 1930s and a future director of the Whitney Museum of American Art. offered a more evenhanded but still favorable assessment in Arts magazine.

Benton's energetic forms and bold color, although at first somewhat overpowering, are effective, a refreshing change from the pallid attenuation of the Puvis de Chavannes school ... It is easily understandable that to many these murals may seem in very bad taste. But their positive virtues are considerably more important than the negative virtues of reserve and refinement which they lack It is fitting and healthy for an artist of genuine force to begin by being over-strong and over-bumptious, the minor virtues will undoubtedly come in time. The important thing is that Benton possesses vitality and a genuine creative giftqualities not too common 25

Such praise elevated Benton's artistic stature considerably both in New York and beyond. He gained influential new patrons including Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, who purchased a large group of his regional sketches from the 1920s in addition to some of the preliminary paintings for America Today Soon thereafter Whitney also commissioned a mural from Benton, Arts of Life in America (New Britain Museum of American Art, Connecticut), and in 1933 he accepted yet another mural commission: an exploration of the history of the State of Indiana for the Chicago World's Fair 26 Finally, on December 24, 1934. Benton's self portrait appeared on the cover of Time magazine, which thereby introduced its readers to the movement that came to be known as Regionalism and helped establish Benton's fame

The Indiana project shifted the balance of Benton's attention back to his native Midwest and away from



15. Detail of infrared reflectogram showing transfer grid in City Activities with Dance Hall

New York, where his newfound prominence added fuel to preexisting personal and artistic conflicts with some of the city's leading cultural figures, including the influential photographer and gallerist Alfred Stieglitz and the modernist painter Stuart Davis Then, upon returning to New York from a trip to the Midwest in the winter of 1935 Benton gave a fateful interview to the New York Times in which he proclaimed that "if there is going to be any art in this country it is going to come from . regional groups in the Middle West. Both the East and West Coast are too highly conditioned by borrowed ideas to produce important art soon."27 Inflammatory and alienating declarations like this set the stage for Benton's departure from the city later that year, when he relocated to Kansas City, Missouri, to pursue opportunities to paint a mural in the Missouri State Capitol and to teach at the Kansas City Art Institute

Long after his departure from New York, America Today remained Benton's artistic and symbolic anchor in the city. In fact, until his death, in 1975, the mural was rarely far from Benton's mind, in part because of emergent and lingering concerns for its condition and safety. As several scholars have observed, inherent

vice stability problems owing to structura, or material deficiencies plaqued Benton's tempera paintings and murals from the start. His idiosyncratic and self taught techniques were largely to blame Benton added too much glue in the underpainting, for example, h,s unconventional choice of support (fabric glued to wallboard) contributed to poor adhesion and his tempera mixture of egg youk dry pigment, and water was inconsistent. As a result, the murals soon began to crack and flake Benton first returned to the New School to address these condition issues in 1931 More problems arose however after the New School began using the boardroom as a general classroom probably sometime in the early 1950s which exposed America Today to corlisions with bodies, desks, and tables among other hazards. Benton came back to New York to repair this damage and to mitigate further deterioration in 1957 and returned again in 1968 (see fig. 41) a testament to his commitment to maintaining the mural as a major, even transformational, project in his career

Letters preserved in the New School Archives between Benton and school officials throughout these years document both the problems that preserving the mural posed and the school's attempts

to remedy the complex situation. One proposal (never realized) in 1954 called for installing railings in front of the panels to prevent incidental contact. 24 Following his visit to repair America Today in 1968, during which the New School conferred an honorary degree on him, Benton, faced with his own mortality after suffering a stroke and a heart attack two years earlier, sent President John Everett a thank-you letter with a lengthy description of the mural's history and materials as well as a prescription for its present and future care. "Because this mural was my first public one, and represents a phaze [sic] of our American culture which has almost completely disappeared," Benton concluded, "I am just as interested in keeping it intact as are you people of the New School "29 Benton wrote to Everett again in December 1972 to thank him for sending a newly published brochure about the mural (and to request more copies) "As you know," he closed this congenial, reflective note, "I have an attachment to the New School Murals because they are the first I executed for a public place—and a remembered attachment for the man [Alvin Johnson] who had died in June 1971| who made them possible." Benton then added this poignant postscript

I hope you still have the instructions
I left with your office for the future care
of the murals. I have heard there has
been talk of changing their position in
the building. If that comes about we
should discuss it before. T. H. B. 30

A little more than two years later, in January 1975, Benton died of another heart attack while working at his easel in his Kansas City studio

Unable to resolve the problems of the mural's ongoing need for protection and conservation in 1982 the New School decided to sell America Today at which point the panels were removed permanently from the third-floor room Consigned for sale at Sotheby's, the mural panels were vulnerable to being separated and dispersed to different owners, a threat forestalled by Mayor Edward Koch's ultimately successful campaign to keep America Today intact and in New York In 1984 the Equitable Life Assurance Society of the United States (now AXA) purchased America Today for display in its new corporate headquarters at 787 Seventh Avenue (fig. 17) The company also underwrote an extensive restoration, which took place at the Williamstown Regional Art Conservation Laboratory (now the Williamstown Art Conservation Center)



16. America Today installed in the New School boardroom, 1931



17. America Today on view in AXA's public lobby at 787 Seventh Avenue, 1986

Massachusetts, from 1984 to 1985 31
After AXA moved to 1290 Avenue of the Americas, in 1996 the mural was hung as separate panels high in the corporation's public lobby, where in subsequent years it attracted devotees of American art novices and experts alike Among the scores of admirers intrigued by the mural even in this altered state was art historian Justin Wolff, Benton's most recent biographer, who credits his interest in the artist specifically to seeing America Today in AXA's lobby

I was caught up in their bold color and dynamic, swirling energy and engrossed by their vignettes of muscular figures dancing, singing drinking and conversing. What impressed me most, however, was the degree to which the mural surpassed merely entertaining narrative. It possesses a palpable argency, more than just a reflection of the progressive social and industrial life of its moment, the vital mural manages to take on a life of its own and stand out as living history.

In 2011, faced with an extensive lobby renovation that necessitated removing the mural panels, AXA sought a new permanent home for America Today and entered into negotiations with the Metropol.tan Museum AXA's decision in December 2012 to make an outright

gift of the mural to the Metropolitan meant that for the first time the general public would be able to enjoy, study and entique Benton's landmark mural as the complete room originally envisioned by the artist (see the detail of the current installation on pages 20–21). Moreover as newly conserved and displayed, America Today can now be properly assessed by scholars and will no doubt become part of the origing reconsideration and reappraisal of Benton's contributions to American art

Near the end of his autobiography first published in 1937, Benton reminisced about his former life in New York in long passages tinged with nostalgia but also laced with colorful, occasionally politically incorrect language characteristic of the man and his time. "I must confess," he admitted

that Chicago, Pans, and New York
have had for me, and still have, great
attractions—particularly the latter
Even though I have little faith left in
the leadership of New York and am
through with it, I love the place
When, and if, the hinterlands use up
and put an American art, and me
with it, on the map of world culture.
I shall continue to think of New York
with affection. Particularly shall I
think of that area around the lower
part of the town that stretches from
Union Square in all directions to the
south, where I have lived so long

I shall think of the shopgirs with their slim waists and swishing tails who, in the past before I was married of course, used to be a favorite subject of contemplation. I shall think of the burlesque shows particularly the one on Fourteenth Street, now gone . where the art of "stnpping" [had] just begun, used to make the old boys drool at the mouth and keep their hands in their pockets. Union Square with its enraged sincenties, manifested in all sorts of highly proclaimed nostrums for the ailing body, physical social, and spiritual. I can never forget. Nor shall I forget the various entertainments and benefits of the region, always dedicated, in late years, to alleviating some difficulty of the toiling masses where the proletarian dancers generally a little too long or too short in the legs or too little or too big around the sitter, would cavort in devastating pantomime against the evils of capitalism. I shall remember more respectable things too-nice houses where you talked quietly and got drunk in a leisurely way, with due regard for the manners and prejudices of the high-toned

There are many people I shall remember, people I learned to like artists and writers and lawyers, actors and pugs, homos and skirt chasers radicals and conservatives men and women, Jews, gentiles yellow men and black I shall remember best my students, especially those who used to sit with me on Monday night and blow on the harmonica to the guitar accompaniment of Rudy, the furner who lived around the corner <sup>33</sup>

Benton's memones of his years in New York strikingly evoke many of the themes and images brought to hie in the visual cacophony of the City Activities panels of America Today. As they reflect back on his early artistic triumph in the New School, these warm recollections leave no doubt that the city he seemingly left for good in 1935 was never fully lost in his proverbial rearview mirror.

# AMERICA TODAY





# **INSTRUMENTS OF POWER**





The largest of the America Today panels, and the one that first confronts viewers as they enter the mural room, Instruments of Power depicts modern sources of energy -a steam locomotive, hydroelectricity (produced by the dam at right), and the combustion engine-amid an efficient industrial utopia. As critic Suzanne La Follette wrote in a glowing review of America Today in The New Freeman, "A whole panel is given to marvelous machines . no one can suggest the speed and power of an engine as Mr Benton can ... It is enough to say of this grouping that it produces exactly the effect implied in the title "54 With forms projecting outward in all directions, Instruments of Power asserts the seemingly inescapable reach of modern progress in its industrial manifestations and represents a culmination of ideas and subjects that had occupied Benton for much of the preceding decade In Bootleggers (fig. 18), for instance, a painting from 1927 that evokes the widespread liquor trafficking during Prohibition, monoplanes buzz across the sky and a train zips across a bridge. Similatly, a zeppelin appears in Construction, from 1923 (see fig 29), which shows the building of the New York skyline, a subject the artist returned to in the City Building panel of America Today 35

For Instruments of Power, Benton extracted the train, monoplane, and zeppelin from the narratives of his earlier efforts and cast them as large, irrepressible icons of modern progress. Trainsa subject that Benton, in his autobiography, recalled drawing as a child-appear eight times across seven America Today panels (including the subway scene), providing continuity throughout the sweeping composition. The speeding train also emphasizes the role the locomotive played in transforming the American landscape and culture The prominent monoplane and zeppelin likewise appear as both products and agents of industrial change. Whereas the earthbound train facilitated

America's expansion into and development of the West, the airborne monoplane and zeppelin made global travel faster, safer, and more common. They also contribute an international dimension to Benton's otherwise mostly nationalist program.

The monoplane and zeppelin were timely subjects Throughout the 1920s technological developments in aviation had fueled a culture of competition and record-setting in both time in the air and distance traveled Numerous celebrity pilots captured the public imagination with feats of modern aviation magic 36 The most famous was Charles Lindbergh whose thirty-three-hour nonstop solo flight from New York to Paris in May 1927 made him a national hero and an international celebrity. According to aviation historian Bob van der Linden of the National Air and Space Museum the red-orange airplane in Instruments of Power is a stylized depiction of the Ryan NYP (for "New York-to-Pans"), a model of the Ryan Brougham that began production in 1926 as a larger version of Lindbergh's legendary Spirit of St. Louis 37 The zeppelin was yet another symbol of advances in longdistance travel in the early twentieth century, and it, too, had a notable corollary in headlines of the day the Graf Zeppelin, which completed a senes of highly publicized transatlantic and global journeys throughout the 1920s two of which the artist would have been particularly aware of because they culminated in dramatic flights over the New York skyline 35

The remaining subjects in *Instruments* of *Power* — the dam and the combustion engine — suggest the prodigious production of energy from hydroelectric power and biofuels, demand for which had skyrocketed throughout the 1920s In one of the most stylistically abstract passages in *America Today*, Benton represented the engine (possibly a diesel) in cross section, with its animated pistons joined to an axle and wheel.



The artist's use of broken forms and gesture to convey energy reflects his familiarity with contemporary trends in modern art, including Synchromism and Italian Futurism. Similarly his inclusion of the dam reveals an aware ness of the proliferation of hydroelectric facilities across the country at that time particularly throughout Western states 39 Receding quickly into space, the dam's stark facade echoes the leftward thrust of the train on the other side of the composition. It also recalls the art of Italian painter Giorgio de Chirico Several scholars have noted resemblances between Benton's stage like architectural motifs and de Chirico's Surrealist imagery De Chinco had made headlines in New York in the 1920s after having established his reputation in Europe more than a decade earlier 40 Benton may have seen his work at Wanamaker's Gallery of Modern Decorative Art on Broadway and Eighth

Street, otherwise known as Belmaison Gallery when it was on view from November to December 1921, only five months after Benton had exhibited his own work there. It is also possible that Benton saw de Chinco's show at Valentine Gallery from January to February 1928 (the artist's first one-man exhibition in New York), considering the controversy it aroused within the city's art circles.

Instruments of Power opens
America Today on a bombastic note
but one very much in keeping with
the pervasive and optimistic belief
in progress that characterized American
culture throughout the 1920s By
the time the viewer exits the room
the mood has changed dramatically
however, as the images in many
of the other panels signal the harsh
new realities that confronted most
Americans at the beginning of the following decade are



18. Bootleggers, 1927.
Egg tempera and oil
on linen mounted on
Masonite; 65 × 72 in.
(165.1 × 182.9 cm)
Reynolda House Museum
of American Art,
Winston-Salem,
North Carolina; Museum
Purchase with funds
provided by Barbara B.
Millhouse (1971.2.1)

## DEEP SOUTH

Benton portrayed the South as fundamentally rural agrarian, and unindustrialized, stressing what he saw as the region's unbreakable bond to the past Focusing on the human labor needed to support all aspects of the cotton industry or "King Cotton," he relegated modern technologica, advances to the distant background a train on the honzon and a mechanical rice thresher at upper left. Benton based his composition in part on sketches he had made while traveling through Georgia and Louisiana in the summer and fall of 1928. These sketches, later shown in a one-artist exhibition at Delphic Studios, New York, inspired Benton's many paintings of cotton and rice harvesting into the 1940s (see fig. 6)

The dynamic narrative of Deep South unfolds across the composition beginning

at left, where a white farmer prepares the soil for seeding. Directly across from him, black workers harvest and transport the cotton by horse drawn cart to the old nverboat, at center A heroically propor boned black man emptying a bag of cotton dominates and anchors the scene Benton's imagery - full of associations with the history of slavery, the region's ongoing racial tensions, and the beleaguered cotton industry — acknowledges that the South was built on the labor of enslaved Americans. The artist himself was a vocal critic of that legacy, describing the South as "a land of beauty and horror, of cultivation and refinement, laid over misery and degradation. It is a land of tremendous contradictions "42

In Benton's vision of the "modern"

South, cotton is still harvested manually

as it had been by enslaved workers prior to the Civil War Benton underscored the importance of slave labor to the South's economy by including nce (upper left) sugarcane (upper right), and possibly tobacco (lower left), all Southern crops traditionally picked by hand. The field of sugarcane, in particular, which spreads behind the monumental worker, alludes to the historical origins of the slave trade in colonial America, Benton locates, the subject in the present day, however by juxtaposing the black cotton worker with the white farmer Benton's farmer notably, is a sharecropper or tenant farmer using an old-fashioned disc harrow - the reins of which the artist cleverly integrated into the silver aluminum-leaf molding - and not a more modern tractor Benton described Southern tenant farmers as "slaves of an outmoded land system," adding that "the deep suspicions which have been developed in the South by playing the Negro against the poor white in the economic struggle are easily inflamed."43

The situation for American cotton workers was dire in the 1920s. A combination of decreasing crop yields owing to the boll weevil (a pest that feeds on cotton buds and blossoms) and increasing industrialization had devastated the labor force "The economic situation of the South "Benton observed "is not permanently tenable King Cotton is going the way of other kings "44 The emphatically empty bag of Benton's massive field worker may symbolize the end of that era as well as the lack of local opportunities, although Alvin Johnson, director of the New School a.so saw the monumentality of the figure as Benton's representation of the "tnumphant Negro."45

Between the farmer and worker black prisoners cultivate the land as members of a chain gang, a practice Benton denounced <sup>46</sup> A guard with a shotgun oversees their labor, his authority accentuated by the silver framework that separates him from the



19. Study for "Instruments of Power" and "Deep South," co. 1930. Oil on Masonite; 14 × 18 in. (35.6 × 45.7 cm). Collection of AXA, New York



20. Dock Scene, 1928. Pencil, ink, wash, and graphite on paper; 10 ½ × 14 ½ in. (26.4 × 37.8 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (31.490)



prisoners. In early studies for this passage Benton included a young gul sorting cotton in the position of the guard (fig. 19) a devastating shift in emphasis that underscores the wretched conditions of the prisoners and conveys Benton's impression that the gun toting guards "have a menacing air" and "look dangerous and merciless."

Despite his misgivings about the region's past and present, Benton, son of a former Confederate soldier who had once owned slaves, admitted that the South had a "romantic effect" on his imagination. His nostalgia for childhood visits to the South with his father inspired him to sketch the Tennessee Belle, the last steamboat to transport.

cotton on the Mississippi River (fig. 20)
We watched the boat until she slipped out of sight around the river bend."
Benton remembered, "her smoke trailing lazily like the last fringes of a fading memory of the past." Central to the composition of Deep South here the Belle becomes a multivalent and perhaps ambivalent symbol of a bygone era. Sih

# MIDWEST

As a Midwesterner himself. Benton had persona, connections to the imagery and symbolism in this panel. The scene, which is more industrialized than Deep South, exemplifies the kind of "progress" celebrated in Instruments of Power but also hints at struggle and the consequences of hubns. The focus is on the cleaning and cultivation of the landscape and the labor necessary to transform virgin forest into productive wheat fields Benton v.sually conflated certain aspects of the logging industry while suggesting the role of the region, the nation s "breadbasket" in supplying food for America's growing population

The logging scene, at right dominates the panel in both area and scale Benton's powerful lumberacks exemplify the mythic frontiersmen who had cleared the way for westward expansion Their forceful poses and the dynamic angles created by the massive, tumbling tree trunks animate the composition, while a jug of illicit moonshine suggests their pioneering attitudes and echoes the forbidden Proh.b.tion-era consumption of a cohol in the City Activities panels Meanwhile deforestation brought about by their heroic but aggressive felling creates an ominous and forebodingly dark landscape the artist's warning against the exploitation of nature Benton based the logging vignette on sketches he had made on travels through the forests of Tennessee, West Virginia, Kentucky and Missouri (fig. 21) 49 As with some of the passages in Deep South, there is a tinge of nostalgia here. as Benton believed the Aileghenies, B. Je R.dge, Great Smokies, and Ozarks "hold our simple pioneer past in their bosoms and . . in many instances, give us the peace of old, quaint, and quiet trad.t.ons "50

The land at left cleared for cultivation, has been transformed into an expansive and productive wheat field, recalling the "amber waves of grain" in the patriotic song "America, the Beautiful" (1910) Benton contrasted



21. The Fall, ca. 1929. Pencil, ink, wash, and graphite on paper;  $11\% \times 8\%$  in. (29.5  $\times$  22.2 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (31.492)

industrialized farming, signified by the modern grain elevator, with the small independent farmer, shown harvesting corn by hand. The grain elevator towers over the scene, echoing the skyscrapers that appear in the urban panels but also evoking contemporary Precisionist paintings by Charles Sheeler and Charles Demuth. "The most substantial things in the little western towns," Benton elaborated in his autobiography, "are the grain elevators and water tanks by the sides of the failroads. These stick up and face the open land with the hard defiance of their utility "51 The mechanized farm equipment Benton chose to depict -a fuel-driven tractor and a combine (harvester and thresher) -had revolutionized farming practices in America. Similarly, the Model T. at left, the nation's first mass-produced automobile, had made travel accessible to ordinary Americans, not only the migrant workers seen here alongside the car, but Benton himself, who in 1926 bad explored the Texas Panhandle in one of Henry Ford's "tin lizzies."52

In the lower left corner, an independent farmer harvests corn with his pigs nearby. Hogs were the region's most important livestock and pork remained the most popular meat in the United States through the early twentieth century But the reference also had personal significance for Benton whose maternal grandfather, Pappy Wise, had settled in Missouri in 1854 and farmed the land. The artist greatly admired his grandfather s resilience and resourcefulness, recounting in his autobiography Pappy Wise's struggle to subsist in the face of floods that washed away his feed corn and choiera that decimated his hogs. (Pappy Wise eventually abandoned farming and moved to Texas, hoping to improve his fortunes )53 Elsewhere in his autobiography Benton devotes several pages to inghtening encounters between praine settlers and rattlesnakes that "coil and snap like lightning "54 Here, the rattlesnake motif, derived from an earlier sketch (fig. 22), may allude to the danger inherent in zealous overproduction for profit, a temptation that seduced many speculators and farmers throughout the 1920s and contributed to the dramatic collapse of crop prices. sun



22. Rattlesnakes, 1920s. Ink on paper; 7 × 8 ¼ in. (17.8 × 22.2 cm). Collection of AXA, New York



# **CHANGING WEST**

More than either Deep South or Midwest. Changing West addresses how modern industry transformed the American landscape. The panel focuses on the booming oil business, which gave use to new concentrations of wealth throughout the frontier states. In capturing the frenzied change wrought on the region — by the surveying of the land, the laying of pipelines, and the burning of oil to produce carbon and petroleum by-products — Benton relied on imagery recalling the popular Western films of the era

The oil dernck (fig. 23), at center, dominates and divides the composition, signifying the towering influence of the industry over the region and separating the new West from its cowboy past. To the right, in a vignette derived from Boomtown (Memorial Art Gallery, University of Rochester), a major painting by Benton from 1928 a lone building represents a haphazard shantytown on the verge of dramatic change as the modern gas pump (replacing the old-fash.oned h.tching post) and the car parked around the corner (possibly a Ford Model T) hint at the arrival of oil in the town In the background Benton



23. Oil Derricks, 1920s. Pencil, ink, and sepia wash on paper; 9 × 7 in. (22.9 × 17.8 cm). Collection of AXA, New York

suggests the expansive landscape of the Western plains. A cowboy on his horse, tending his cattle, recalls imagery of earlier paintings and sculptures by American artists associated with the West, such as Frederic Remington and Charles Manon Russell, it also evokes the myth of the West as popularized in cinema. Yet Benton's cowboy (fig. 24) is relegated to the distant horizon, suggesting that rural frontier life has largely been supplanted by industry Benton remarked on the apparent isolation of these Western types from bustling urban life. "Cowboys ... speak little and enunciate slowly. They are big silent fellows for the most part . . . they are not wordy like city people "55

The quietness of the plains stands in contrast to the furious activity to the left of the derrick. Industrial oil refinences mirror the small shantytown, while surveyors search for oil on land and by air. Airplanes crowd the sky, suggesting the rush to discover new energy sources and the rapid development of flight for commercial purposes. In the foreground the most prominent worker solders a piece of pipeline. Like the airplanes in the sky, he works to connect the West and its resources to the rest of the country.

Benton's conception of the West derives largely from Borger, Texas, a town in the Panhandle he visited in 1926 when it was "on the boom "56 Borger was known as "Booger Town" for its corruption and lawless, rough character, but in Changing West Benton nevertheless celebrated the energy of its boom economy and the pervasive optimism among those hoping to strike it rich. "There was a belief," he wrote in his autobiography, "written in men's faces, that all would find a share in the gifts of this mushroom town . Borger on the boom was a big party an exploitative whoopee party where capital, its guards down in exultant discovery, joined hands with everybody in a great democratic dance. "57 Benton tempered this optimism, however, with the dark, black smoke billowing



24. Portrait of a Cowboy, 1929. Pen, ink, wash, and graphite on paper; 11 % × 8 ½ in. (28.9 × 21.6 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (31.495)

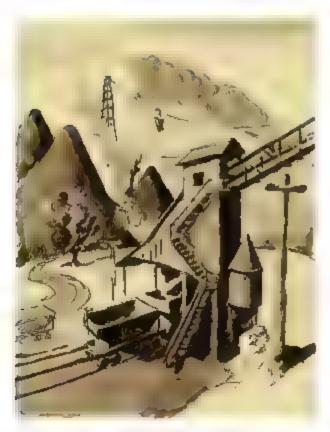
across the composition. Carbon black, a petroleum by-product created by the burning of oil was in great demand in the 1920s especially for use in automobile tires. For Benton, the smoke from carbon black production was a harbinger of the environmental costs of progress, a metaphor for the "great wasteful extravagant burning of resources for momentary profit" and "the mighty anarchic carelessness of our country "56"

Prominent at lower right is a diesel engine burning fossil fuel to create powerful and reliable energy displacing the less efficient windmil, beyond. Adjacent to the engine Benton represented the diversity of the boomtown with four figures in an ambiguous setting a cowboy, a Native American, a blond woman whose tawdry cosmetics suggest she is in Benton's words one of the town's "adventurous girls," or prost.tutes. and a person whose dress appears Asian 59 All are marginalized in Benton's composition Hemmed in beneath the silver aluminum leaf molding, they recede into the background and stand apart from the progress of the town. sin



# COAL

Amid the general optimism of America Today, Coal is a sobering reminder that progress regulies hard work in hazardous circumstances, often from workers who go unrecognized Benton's somber composition reflects his empathy for coal miners and their struggles in a troubled industry Unlike the other panels along the east and west walls which show teams of productive laborers working together Coal is populated by just three fully developed figures in the foreground and about a half-dozen small subouettes in the distance. The most prominent miner slumps under the weight of his labor (represented by the pickax) his long hours of toil sign, fied by his hunched back and food pail Large and muscular, he nevertheless appears overwhelmed by his circumstances and his strong hands carry his equipment but are not otherwise engaged in productive work. The two subsidiary miners share his stooped posture, but all three appear isolated from one another. The entrance to the flery pit, at center, makes vivid the inherent dangers and hellish conditions they endure.



25. Cooling Station, West Virginia, 1928. Pen, ink, wash, and pencil on paper; 11 % × 8 % in. [30.2 × 22.4 cm]. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (31.488]

The American coal industry suffered greatly in the 1920s. Although demand for coal had skyrocketed during World War I as mechanization allowed supply to reach record levels, in the 1920s newly accessible sources of energy, especially petroleum products, caused demand to plummet. As wages fell and jobs were lost, the industry was plagued by antagonism and violence, including sometimes deadly strikes. Indeed, Benton's attempts to visit coal mines were met with suspicion by guards and superintendents, who accused the artist of trespassing Benton recorded his encounters with miners in Pennsylvania and West Virginia during his travels in 1928, lamenting that "they were tied to the coal lands with their stinking palls of smoke, long rows of gas-erupting coke ovens, and dark miseries of disorganized union battle where at the time the miners' potential power for improving their lot was lost in fratricidal animosity, in racial hate, and in the chicaneries of low politics."40 Benton's massive miner seems resigned to this fate shouldering the burden of the failing industry as he descends the stairs to his shift below ground

At right, Benton limned the bleak landscape in a subdued palette of grays with red and rose accents. Atop the rugged peak in the distance, the mining town seems remote, inaccessible, and removed from the modern world with only the faint silhouette of a lone figure ascending to it. These "dark shack towns," Benton wrote, "nurtured vice as well as misery ... [the miners] could not return to the sampler life of their fathers, even had there been a place where they might find it "41 At left. Benton suggests the diverse means by which coal was transported across the nation for processing and consumption, from the mining cart (fig. 25) to the train and, finally, the ship, the latter suggesting the great distances coal often traveled to reach its ulti mate destination: the electrical power



26. Factory, ca. 1929. Pencil on paper; 8 × 5 ln. (20.3 × 12.7 cm). Collection of AXA, New York

plant, seen here looming in the background (fig. 26)

In 1929 Benton exhibited at Delphic Studios. New York, a group of sketches he made during visits to the coal regions of Pennsylvania and West Virginia. These drawings later became the foundation for the Coal panel and for a series of paintings. Benton made in the early 1930s on the subject of strife between workers and management. sin



### STEEL

Essential to modern progress—especially the construction of cities, transportation infrastructure and consumer goods such as automobiles—steel was, in Benton's words, "the very focus of my picture" Filled with contrasts of light and dark this panel captures the awesome alchemy of steel production, in which solids are turned into liquids before being returned to solid form. Benton condenses different phases of steel production in the scene, choosing to emphasize the strength of the workers and their centrality to the industry's success.

In his autobiography Benton
elaborated on the importance of steel
at the turn of the century "[A]II that was
romantic and aspiring in the American
spirit found its expression in steel
The outreaching railroad lines, the great
bridges, the engines, the ships of that
expanding exploitative period were
converging, when I reached Chicago
toward its final expression the skyscraper "45 Indeed, steel is represented
throughout America Today, particularly

in the trains and automobiles that connect regions and transport the products of the various laborers. (The only panels that do not include a method of transportation are Steel itself, City Activities with Dance Hall, and Outreaching Hands.) Benton had been fascinated by steel production throughout the 1920s and had sketched the exteriors of several plants, but he was thwarted in his attempts to gain access to a factory intenor in order to make the studies necessary for his composition. "Those babies won't let me get near steel," he complained to New School director Alvin Johnson "An artist! What the hell does an artist want with steel? Out with him, he must be a communist."44 It was Johnson, in the end, who arranged for Benton to visit Bethlehem Steel's plant at Sparrows Point, Maryland, then one of the largest and most productive in the world "I stuck my nose into everything " Benton crowed "Under the flying sparks and in the metallic din of opening blast furnaces I have tried to draw running steel while the hunkles kidded me and

the company guards looked on, wonder ing what had got into the bosses heads that they should turn a 'nut' loose in the plant."45 His drawings of the factory's intenor - among the few site specific studies for America Today he made after receiving the New School commission revel in the sinuous curves of the massive pipes and the dramatic atmosphere created by the molten steel (figs. 27, 28) In the completed panel Benton inventively conflated interior and exterior views of Sparrows Point, suggesting the exterior of the plant at the top of the composition, where it hovers over the scene much like the grain elevator in Midwest and the power plant in Coal He also varied the sizes of the figures and their relationships to the immense machinery inside in order to convey the otherworldly scale of the vast sprawling complex

Benton's most celebrated student Jackson Pollock (see fig. 11), likely posed for the figure of the lanky but muscular steelworker at right. Larger than life and dramatically illuminated from below by the glow of molten metal, he is a powerful, productive machine in human form. Benton's admiration for his student and for steelworkers in general is evident in this sensitive portrayal Johnson certainly had this figure in mind when he observed that "Benton does not look upon modern industry as a hornble martyrdom of the worker amid the clanger and haste and heat of colossal machines. He has seen men at work He has observed the sense of triumph on the face of the man who handles a great machine, taps a blast furnace, sees a building rising out of the blueprint in his hands. For the strong and fit, the life of big industry is one of victory "66 sin



27 Blast Furnace, Number 1, 1929 or 1930. Pen, ink, wash, and pencil on paper; 14½ × 10½ in. (37 × 26.4 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (31 486)



28. Blast Furnace, Number 2, 1929 or 1930.
Watercolor, pen, ink, wash, and pencil on paper;
12 ½ × 9 ½ in. (32.7 × 23.5 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (31.487)



#### **CITY BUILDING**

Industry and economic prosperity fueled extraordinary growth in the United States throughout the 1920s. For many Americans, proof of national progress was nowhere more evident than in the dynamic skyline of New York, where powerful merchants and industrialists vied for vertical supremacy. In City Building, Benton addressed the combination of labor and invention that had created the modern city, symbolized by the skyscraper.

I am aware of all the false logic that lies behind the skyscraper, of its foundation in deviously manipulated land values and brutal standards of living, but it stands, nevertheless, as the first effort of the American spirit to give itself an original monumental expression. Only one utterly blinded by the self-conscious moralities of uplift and reformst pretensions can fail to see the beauty of these great structures, lifted above the dirt and squalor at their feet into our bright American sky 47

The panel is the culmination of Benton's abiding interest in recording New York construction scenes evident throughout



29. Construction, 1923 Ink with all wash on convas, 29 % × 25 % in. (74.3 × 63.8 cm). Nelson-Alkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri; Bequest of the artist (F75-21/42)

h.s works from the 1920s. He borrowed several of the motifs in City Building from Construction (fig. 29), a preparatory study from 1923 related to his ambitious American Historical Epic mural, where, as Erika Doss explains, the building of the modern city symbolized the "dynamism of twentieth-century American life and labor "66 Similarly, in 1927 Benton had planned a four-panel mural program (never realized) for the New York Public Library on the history of Manhattan, which he intended would chmax with a construction scene that he titled New York To-Day (ca. 1927, Benton Testamentary Trust)

At right in City Building is an up-to-the-minute portrait of the skyline of the southern tip of Manhattan as seen from New York Harbor. A docked ship and a train herald the arrival of raw materials, possibly the steel produced in the adjacent panel. In the distance, the skyscraper at 40 Wall Street (originally the Bank of Manhattan Trust Building) towers over all others in the vicinity. It was, in fact, the world's tallest building for one month in the spring of 1930 before being surpassed in May by the Chrysler Building.

In the lower right corner an architect studies a blueprint Turned away from the composition, he stands apart from but is essential to the design of the city Moreover, his massive forearms and strong hands visually connect him to the other laborers throughout America Today At left are yet more resilient workers actively engaged in different types of vigorous labor. The powerful presence of the man operating the drill asserts the critical role of black labor in the growth of New York He also alludes to the Great Migration, the mass relocation of blacks from the South to urban centers in the North beginning in the early decades of the century. Painter Reginald Marsh posed for this figure, which Benton combined with a portrait study (fig 30) Unlike Deep South, visible directly across the room, here in the



30. Black Man, 1920s. Pencil on paper;  $12 \times 8 \ \mbox{$V$_2$ in.}$  (30.5  $\times$  21.6 cm). Collection of AXA, New York

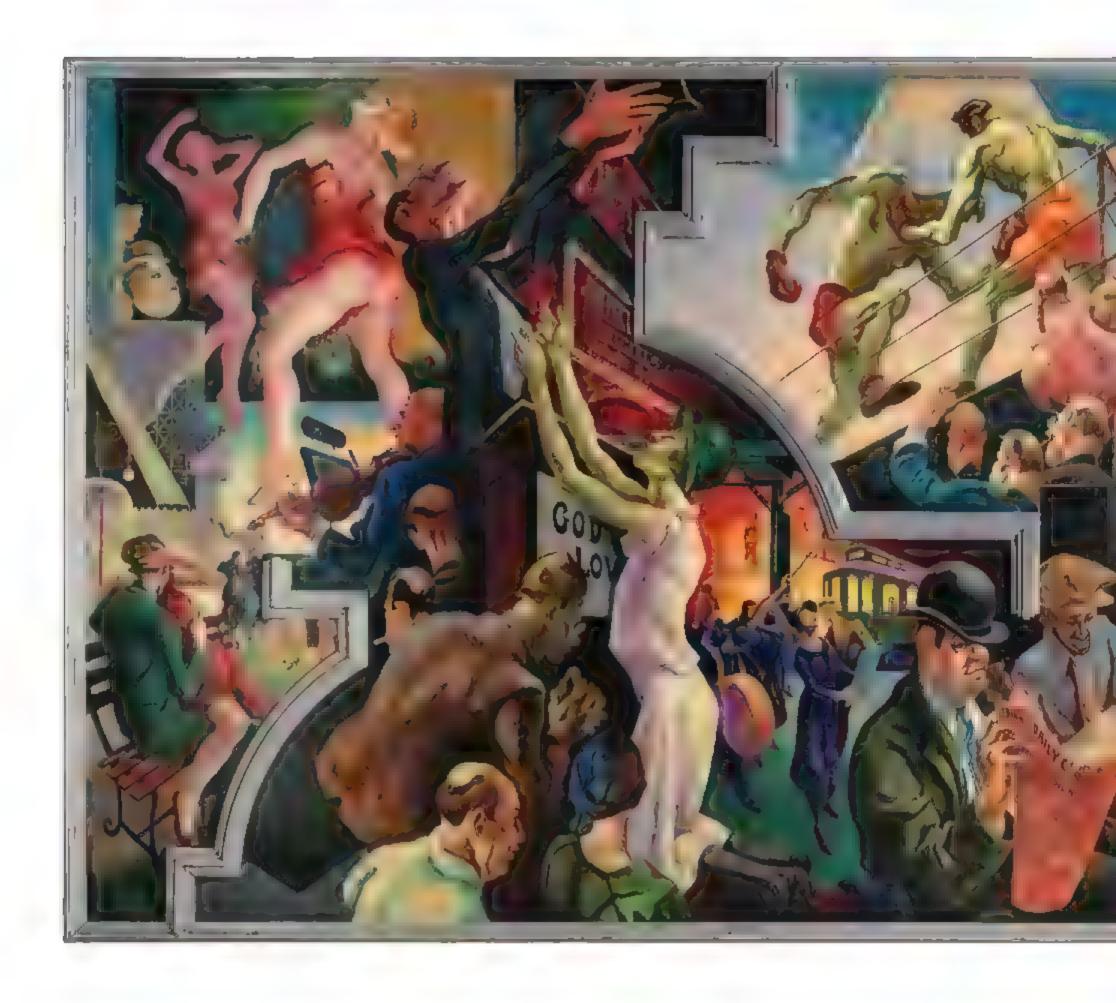
modern city black and white laborers work alongside one another, a point. Benton drove home by tightly compressing the space between them. Benton also hints, however, at a disquieting aspect of the construction business through the two men at center wearing dark suits and fedoras and exchanging money (gold coins) a suggestion of the bribery that was rampant in the industry

City Building represents the transformation of the United States from a rura. to a more urban nation, but it is also Benton's statement of his appreciation for the American worker. As Alvin Johnson later recalled.

One cotic, on seeing the first panels complained to me that Benton had no social philosophy. He depicted the gigantic, inhuman machinery of industrialism with never a pathetic note for the wage slaves operating it. Indeed, the operators do look thumphant. Too bad. But I too have seen the men in industry operating thousand horsepower machinery. They look thumphant, they are thumphant. \*\* sin



## CITY ACTIVITIES WITH SUBWAY





The two panels flanking the entrance to America Today both depict the vibrant metropolis that was New York in the 1920s Distinguished by their brightly colored, tightly compressed, and action packed sequences of urban scenes, they are also larger than the individual panels on the east and west walls On the left is City Activities with Subway, which teems with the noisy fast-paced, chaotic, and bawdy nature of modern life in New York Popular entertainments diversions, and amusements-from raucous dance halls to sporting events—offer release from the Machine Age celebrated in Instruments of Power, seen directly across the room At the same time, the panel points to pervasive fears of moral and economic decline and acknowledges the barrage of words and images in newspapers and advertising posters that would forever change the way information was received Also, in a notable departure from the other panels, which are dominated by

depictions of men, in both of the City

Activities panels Benton incorporated sensual female figures on a grand scale, from the modern flapper to bare-bottomed shimmy shake" dancers Benton personalized these panels with portrayals of people he knew and scenes that he had witnessed himself

At right is Benton's snapshot of a crowded subway car filled with a democratic mix of urban dwellers many of whom are based on portrait sketches and can be identified as acquaintances of the artist. The handsome white-haired man, for example, is Benton's close friend Max Eastman editor of the Marxist magazine The Masses and a leader of the community of "freethinkers" in Greenwich Village (fig 31) Shown seated, he looks up dreamily at the young woman who stands before him hanging on to a strap Although Eastman was an avowed feminist in his writings, the suggestive gaze of the figure in the mural and the



31 Max Eastman, ca. 1930. Pencil on paper;  $17\% \times 13$  in.  $(45 \times 33$  cm). Collection of AXA, New York



32. Peggy Reynolds, 1929. Penal on paper, 8 ½ × 5 ½ in. (20.9 × 14.3 cm). Collection of AXA, New York

p.acement of his hand may have been a humorous allusion to Eastman's reputation as a ladies' man <sup>70</sup>

A phenomenon of the Roaning
Twenties, the newly enfranchised
partially emancipated New Woman
shown here standing in the subway
while the men are seated—captured



33. Dencer, 1930. Pencil and crayon on paper; 21 ¼ × 14 in. (54 × 35.6 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (31.489)



34. Shorty McAllister, The Irving Place Theatre, NY, 1928-30. Percil on paper; 8 × 5 in. (20.3 × 12.7 cm). Collection of AXA, New York

the public imagination even if she sometimes met with disapproval or censure For his subway rider, Benton drew inspiration from his 1929 portrait sketch of the burlesque star Peggy Reynolds (fig. 32), whom he had seen perform in his Greenwich Village neighborhood Shanng a similar voyeunstic interest with friend and fellow artist Reginald Marsh, Benton fondly recalled in his autobiography the "shopgirls with their slim waists and swishing tails" and "the burlesque shows, particularly . . the one on Fourteenth Street, now gone . . . where the art of 'stripping' [had] just begun. "71 Elizabeth Pollock, Jackson's sister-in-law, later wrote that she had posed for the figure, shown scantily dressed in modern "flapper" attire, including her rolleddown rayon stockings. She remembered being "inhmidated by Benton's gruff manner ... he ordered me to roll my stockings down to my ankles . . stared at me gnmly . . . until I complied "72 Squeezed in nearby, a man places his left hand on his knee, which overlaps with the standing woman's leg, he leans in toward the cigar-smoking alderman to peek at his tabloid, headlined "Bankers Love Nest."73

From the subway scene the silver molding leads the viewer's eye up to a boxing match (notably featuring a low blow) before a packed audience of male onlookers. Boxing, which Benton had taken up during his stint in the Navy, was a popular form of entertainment in the 1920s. It was also one of the great civic spectacles of the Jazz Age, owing in part to the success of the Jack Dempsey-Gene Tunney heavyweight championship bouts of the 1920s, which created sports heroes but also fueled betting among the American public. \*\*

In the corner at upper left, a burlesque performer shummes provocatively and throws her head back for the audience. In Benton's lively drawing of the dancer, frenetic lines indicate motion and rhythm, not just her near nakedness (fig. 33). Neon lights outside.



35 The Preacher, 1920s. Pencil on paper; 14 Vz × 10 Vz in. (36.8 × 26.4 cm). Collection of AXA, New York

the theater promise "50 Girls," while onstage the striptease acts alternate with comedy skits, combining sex and humor Portrayed at far left is burlesque veteran Shorty McAllister, a slapstick comedian known to have performed in the theaters of Lower Manhattan frequented by Benton, often on the same stage as Peggy Reynolds. Based on a portrait by Benton (fig. 34) he is shown waiting in the wings with his portly fellow comedian, poised to take the stage after the striptease is finished Amid these distractions and pleasures of the flesh Benton features a scene of fundamentalist reaction, again using humor to drive home his point. An evangelical soapbox preacher, drawn from a sketch (fig. 35), implores his flock to avoid temptations despite the scantily clad dancer shown peniously close behind him A Salvation Army band provides music while a large sign assures the faithful of "God's Love " In a fitting coda at lower left an amorous couple beneath the Coney Island roLer coaster known as The Chase Through the Clouds evokes the amusement park's popular nickname, "Sodom by the Sea." EMK

### CITY ACTIVITIES WITH DANCE HALL

City Activities with Dance Hall brilliantly echoes City Activities with Subway in ts evocation of the raucous sound and music of New York here captured n writhing figures and musicians with instruments. Popular entertainments. are juxtaposed with more somber references to the emerging realities of the Depression and to the urgent need for progressive solutions. As the masses enjoy the pleasures of the city, a Wall Street stockbroker hovering over the scene checks his ticker tape machine the latest model, invented in 1930, allowed for faster tracking) just as the Depression takes hold (fig. 36) 75 "My murals," Benton wrote, "include the synthesis of the color and tempo of the jazz age as represented by racketeers fast women gunmen booze hounds and so on. . . My subjects portray American life in the 20th century realistically."76 Indeed, as scholar Leo Mazow has suggested, Benton's works often require "sonic as well as visual assessment." In this panel, for instance, the pastimes Americans seek out are all loud, from dance halls and cinemas to speakeasies, while the thythms and pace of the Jazz Age are further emphasized by the quicksilver dash of the moldings throughout the composition

At left, four couples in a dance half swoon to the music of an orchestra that includes a piano and a large tuba. The women, so-called taxt dancers, perform the popular fox-trot with men who have purchased tickets for "ten cents a whirl " The woman in the foreground, draped in a red dress of cheap fabric, is based on a drawing by Benton (fig. 37) She appears fatigued and leans on her partner, a posture recalling that of the downtrodden male workers who anchor the mural's east and west walls (The fox trot was likely named for the Ziegfeld Folies comedian Harry Fox, while a song called "Ten Cents a Dance," with music by R.chard Rodgers and lyncs by Lorenz Hart, was made into a hit in 1930 and sung by Ruth Etting in a Ziegfeld show)

To their right, Benton features a favorite entertainment of the 1920s, the moving picture, shown here before an audience of young women dressed in fashionable flapper attire Elizabeth Pollock, sister in law of Jackson Pollock, served as a model for the woman wearing a red hat. The movie may be a "talkie," the newly introduced type of film with synchronized dialogue. Such a prominent. reference to the cinema is significant, as Benton had been influenced by early motion pictures, in 1914, through a mendship with filmmaker Rex Ingram, his roommate at the time, he had landed a job working on set designs and scene painting 70 "As the movies of these days did not employ color," Benton recalled, "I made my set designs and backdrops in black and white "79

Beyond the darkened screen the viewer's eye is drawn upward to a second popular entertainment, the circus, shown here in full swing, with a soaning trapeze artist and clowns. Below is a new place for social gathering, the soda fountain again starring Elizabeth Pollock in her signature red hat She dreamily leans forward toward the soda jerk, whom she later identified as the Socialist writer Leo Huberman. 60 The scene is alive with signage, from the mordant "Your Health Demands It Smoke" to a partially legible political poster (\*. R Vote / Fearless Honest. Able / In the service of the people of the city since . . ") for a less-than-inspiring candidate Benton based on a portrait of his father's former law partner \*1

At lower right, Benton included a lifesize self portrait, the artist can be seen standing and holding a paint brush in his left hand in his right hand is a glass with which he toasts to celebrate the completion of the mural with New School director Alvin Johnson, a passage based on a drawing of Johnson smoking his pipe (fig. 38). The vignette is one of several references in America Today to the illicit consumption of alcohol that flourished during



36. Stock Broker, 1920s. Pencil on paper; 11 % × 8 % in. (28.9 × 21 cm). Collection of AXA, New York



37 Woman Dancing, on. 1920s. Pencil on paper; 23  $\frac{1}{4}$  × 19  $\frac{1}{6}$  in. [59 1 × 48.9 cm]. Collection of AXA, New York





Prohibition Benton, in fact, originally included a whiskey bottle behind his self portrait (to the right of his hand) but was later asked by New School staffers to paint it out. 102

Just beyond the self portrait, hanging over a shelf of books, is a small, partially legible sign (" S S Van D , Myste ...") that refers to Willard Huntington Wiight (brother of Benton's friend and fellow artist Stanton Macdonald Wright), who wrote popular mystery novels under the pseudonym S. S. Van Dine. Some scholars have read this passage as Benton once again acknowledging the public's need for "lowbrow" entertainment 65 To the left of the self-portrait is Benton's tender portrayal of his wife, Rita and their son, T. P (fig. 39) The figural group, especially the boy's upraised arm, evokes images of the Virgin and Child in Christian art Mother and son receive instruction from the noted reformist educator Caroline Pratt who was a close friend of the family's

and, with her partner, Helen Marot, a neighbor of the Bentons' on Martha's Vineyard Pratt founded the City and Country School in Greenwich Village where Benton traded his art and taught in exchange for tuition for his son. Behind her figure, Benton includes a stack of hardwood blocks that Pratt developed for teaching children math and precision. The artist also included a playful multiplication problem on the blackboard ("6 x 7"), the product of which indicates his age when he completed the murals

The inclusion of the self-portrait surely speaks to the importance Benton placed on this commission. Furthermore by connecting his self-portrait to the juxtaposed figures of two prominent advocates for progressive thinking. Caroline Pratt and Alvin Johnson. Benton no doubt was signaling his own goals in creating a groundbreaking modern mural EMK.



38. Alvia Johnson, 1929. Pencil on paper; 141/2 × 104/s in. (36.8 × 26 cm). Collection of AXA, New York



39 Portrait of a Boy, 1926~30. Graphite, fabricated chalk, and pastel on board; 13<sup>1</sup>4 × 10 in. (34 × 25.4 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (31.493)

### **OUTREACHING HANDS**



As Benton neared completion of America Today, he came to understand, along with the rest of the country, that the economic depression that had emerged through the fall of 1929 would last longer than most analysts had predicted <sup>65</sup> This realization prompted the artist to



40. Hand, Cup, Pol, ca. 1930–31. Pencil on paper;  $14\frac{1}{2} \times 10\frac{1}{2}$  in. (36.8  $\times$  26.7 cm). Collection of AXA, New York

conclude America Today on a distinctly somber note. Sitting opposite Instruments of Power, Benton's celebration of the Machine Age the narrow overdoor Outreaching Hands nowerfully evokes a breadline and points to capitalist greed as a key factor contributing to the country's deepening economic calamity Although Benton had parted ways ideologically with doctrinaire Mandsm by the mid-1920s the Great Depression reignited his persisting distrust of the capitalist system. In particular, Outreaching Hands suggests that the painter, like many of his contemporaries, blamed America's widespread suffering on the big banks and stock brokerages that had produced spurious campaigns to seduce low-wage and middle-class Americans to overinvest in the markets, rendering themselves vulnerable to devastating financial loss with the downturn.

Hands were a subject on which many painters and photographers would focus throughout the Depression, usually for their symbolic rather than anatomical significance between Benton based his painted composition on sketches from life (fig. 40). On the left, hands clamor for coffee and

bread, suggesting the public distribution of foodstuffs on which increasing numbers of citizens relied for survival. On the right, they grasp money and appear finely appointed with white cuffs and an accompanying top hat, unmistakable markers of class and privilege. These are silhouetted against a strangely ambiguous structure with barred windows that suggests either a prison or a bank. Reduced to a flat facade it recalls Benton's experience building and painting film sets in the 1910s as well as his familianty with the paintings of Giorgio de Chinco.

Outreaching Hands is smaller and notably less visually exuberant than the other panels of the mural While visitors to America Today first encounter a triumphant, idealized depiction of the Machine Age in instruments of Power, as they exit the room and pass beneath Outreaching Hands they symbolically enter a greatly changed world, one permeated by newfound fear and despondency This experience profoundly echoes that of the generation that lived through these vibrant but turbulent years has

# A CONSERVATION HISTORY OF AMERICA TODAY

Shawn Digney-Peer with Cynthia Moyer



41. Benton restoring America Today, 1968

For a twentieth-century work of art Thomas Hart Benton's America Today has an unusually complicated conservation history, comprising three significant restorations one extensive treatment campaign and several minor interventions. The mural panels were restored three times by Benton himself, first in 1931, when he mended cracks in the ground and paint film caused by the in.t.al installation of the mural in the New School boardroom (Too large to navigate the school's staircases, the panels had been lifted from street level to the third floor on rigging attached nappropriately to the flexible wallboard supports causing the panels to bow and disfiguring cracks to appear in the paint surface of the nane larger panels.) The second instance in 1957, was to mitigate nicks and abrasions from a barrage of passing students and wayward chairs after the boardroom was repurposed as a classroom. The varnish, which had d.scolored, was removed and replaced at that time Benton's third restoration in 1968 (fig. 41), addressed lifting paint and associated losses throughout the

work, which he believed were the result of unfavorable environmental conditions. He again removed the varnish as well as excess glue added during the previous treatment, which had caused the paint film to darken. He also changed the color of the frame elements from silver to gold in order to harmonize, in his view with the now darker and warmer tone of the paint film.

A treatment by professional conservators was completed in 1985, shortly after the murals were purchased by AXA (then the Equitable Life Assurance Society of the United States) and ten years after Benton's death \*\* The flexible and unwieldy supports were replaced

with lighter, stiffer materials, and the varnish together with many of Benton's repairs, which had significantly discolored, were removed. Areas where the paint was loose or detached were consolidated losses were retouched and the frame elements were returned to a silver tone. After the panels were installed in the lobby of AXAs New York headquarters, additional minor treatments were undertaken as necessary to consolidate loose paint and repair losses.

When the Metropolitan Museum acquired America Today in 2012 the mural had been on public display for many years followed by a penod in storage. An examination determined that additional conservation treatment was warranted, including the removal of surface grime, local consolidation of lifting paint, and retouching of many thousands of pinpoint lesses (fig. 42 left) The reinstallation at the Museum also provided an opportunity to investigate the origins of the inherent vice that caused the cracking and flaking and to examine the panels using infrared imaging in order to discover how Benton planned and realized his compositions

Benton considered himself well versed in the traditional techniques of old master painting and cared deeply for the longevity of his works yet his methods were idiosyncratic and the results often unstable. For America Today he began by gluing linen to wallboard.





42 Paint film in natural light (left), revealing pinpoint losses, and in raking light (right), showing the mural's brittle and prickly surface



and applying an underlayer of white oil paint. Next, to lay in the composition quickly, he worked in distemper (pigment bound in animal glue). He then painted in egg tempera (a mixture of egg yolk dry pigment, and water) and finished with the addition of local oil glazes. Benton's greatest error was using too high a concentration of glue for his distemper underpainting. As a result. these paint films are, and always will be, susceptible to interlayer cleavage (fig. 42, right) and may require repeated conservation treatments. Furthermore, Benton's heavy-handed restorations did more harm than good. He sloughed off lifting paint rather than properly consolidating it; used excessive amounts of glue, which contributed to the darkening of the paint film; and unintentionally removed original glazes. It is a testament to his brilliant conception that the compromised surfaces did not sabotage the overall success of his artistic vision.

The question of how Benton planned this massive project and transferred his small sketches to the full-size panels was answered in part by examination in infrared light, which showed that he used several different techniques. In some panels he employed a combination of full grids across the entire work and



43. Infrared reflectogram showing where Benton raised the position of a dancer's foot in the distemper underpainting of City Activities with Dance Hall

smaller grids for specific features (see fig. 15). He then executed the distemper underpainting, to which he made local changes (fig. 43). In some areas further additions appear to have been drawn directly over the underpainting with a dry, carbon-based writing implement. probably a pencil (fig. 44). Benton can also be seen accommodating small discrepancies in the planned placement. of the moldings in at least one of the panels by painting in areas that originally would have been left in reserve (fig. 45). It is possible there is even more underdrawing and evidence of compositional changes that we cannot see owing to the limitations of infrared imaging, which most clearly detects carbon-containing materials, such as black pigments, that Benton does not appear to have used extensively in his distemper underpainting.

The moldings that frame and punctuate the murals comprise original elements as well as copies based on the original profile (see fig. 8). They are not structural and do not support the panels as would a traditional frame. Rather, the moldings are an integral component of the mural's design as conceived by Benton and architect Joseph Urban. They also served to conceal the hardware that anchored



44. Infrared reflectogram showing drawing over the distemper underpainting in City Activities with Dance Half



45. Infrared reflectogram showing arced line in underdrawing indicating original angle of the molding

the panels to the wall before the hanging system was changed during the 1984-85 restoration. The longer lengths are basswood with some early elements in maple. They are flat on the back, with no rabbet. and were attached with nails. Their distinctive Art Deco profile includes symmetrical, winglike flats flanking a central astragal (a narrow, half-round molding) Silver in appearance, the surface of the moldings is actually aluminum leafed on to a red-pigmented oil mordant (notable in this context because the aluminum-refining process had been perfected in the United States by Charles Martin Hall at the turn of the twentieth century, reducing the cost of the metal considerably and contributing an important material to the American aviation industry). Traces of Benton's 1968 resurfacing with bronze-powder paint, which was removed during the 1984-85 restoration, can be found on several of the original elements.

Although some of the techniques
Benton employed for America Today
were undeniably flawed, they reflect the
artist's boundless creativity and tenacity.
Indeed, even these few insights into
Benton's practice show him adapting his
procedures and materials with characteristic determination in order to achieve
his unique artistic vision.

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